

Best Practices of Blended Learning

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Students' opinions about blended learning were collected in a survey conducted in May-October, 2017. The objective of the survey was to explore the best practices for blended learning, especially in an online learning environment. The survey was made from the point of view of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. According to the survey, personal feedback, recordings of online lectures and good interaction are examples of things that are important to students.

Introduction

The importance of online learning and online teaching has increased rapidly during the 2000's. Many universities and schools have a strategy for online learning. The advantages of going online are tempting. In the future, the maturity of online activities may be an important competitive advantage.

One of the main tasks of Serious Games Platform for Business and Education project [\[1\]](#) was to study the best practices of online learning. During the project, a literature review and a survey were made from the point of view of Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. The term blended learning was selected as the key term despite the fact that it is a complex one. However, it is a term that is widely used in Oulu University of Applied Sciences (OUAS). The literature review encapsulates the best practices of blended learning and the survey addresses things that are important or less important to students.

Blended learning

The term blended learning can be interpreted in several ways and despite the fact that it was first used in 1999, there is still some confusion as to what it really means [\[2\]](#). Helms [\[3\]](#) also reminds that blended learning means different things to different researchers.

According to Helms [\[3\]](#) several researchers agree that "blended courses can fall anywhere on a continuum between a fully face-to-face course where all teaching and course materials are provided by an instructor in a traditional classroom, and a fully online course where all student-student and student-teacher interaction and learning materials are presented online". Blended learning should be understood as an integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences, instead of layering of one on top of the other [\[3\]](#).

COI model

The Community of Inquiry model presents a framework for describing presence and place online. The CoI model encompasses three dimensions of presence for online learning spaces: teaching, social and cognitive presence. It suggests that effective online learning can only occur when it is supported by a learning community. This community emerges when learners feel emotionally and socially connected to others and are perceived as "real people" (social presence); when the instructional design facilitates discourse and understanding (teaching presence); and when learners are able to reflect, construct, and confirm meaning (cognitive presence), see figure 1. [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#)

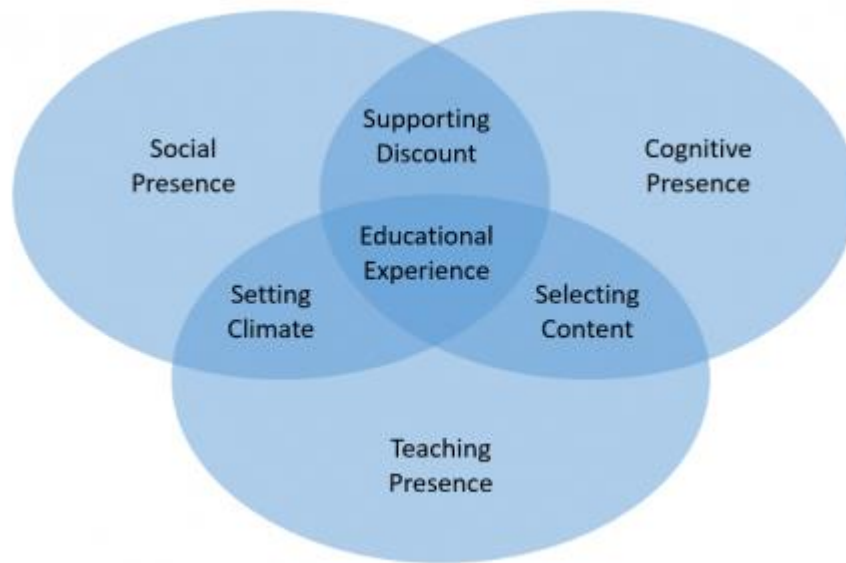


FIGURE 1. Community of Inquiry ^[1]

Social presence is "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g. course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities." ^[6]

Teaching Presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. ^[6]

Cognitive Presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. ^[6]

Method

Students' opinions about blended learning at the OUAS were collected in the Webropol survey conducted in May-October, 2017. The objective of the survey was to explore the best practices for blended learning, especially in an online learning environment. This survey aimed at collecting opinions from students who mainly study online and complete the whole degree in an online environment, without regular participation in contact daytime teaching. Most typically, these studies are arranged as evening-time teaching, outside the normal workday hours. Various online teaching and studying methods are used at the OUAS, but typically, teaching is based on real-time online contact teaching using Adobe Connect conference tool.

The respondents came from three degree programmes: Library and Information Services, Business Economics, and Business Information Systems. The research population covered all the 295 students studying in blended learning groups. The ages of students range typically between 20 and 60. Many of them have jobs and have several years of work experience. Some students may have just graduated from an upper secondary school. Many of these students have also a family.

The survey was conducted in Finnish as an online Webropol survey and it resulted in 60 responses. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions of which 14 were closed-ended and 9 open-ended questions. The most important closed-ended questions were based on a 5-step scale. The responses given in the closed-ended questions were completed in open questions. Background information questions consists of gender, age group, degree program, study year, prior work experience, and prior online studying experience.

The research is mainly based on statistical research methods, in order to get a general view about the best practices for blended learning. The qualitative methods were used in the analysis of open-ended questions. The data was analysed by using MS Excel, basic reporting tools in Webropol, and IBM SPSS Statistics. The response rate is 20 percent.

Results from the point of view of Teaching Presence

A clear schedule, clear instructions for learning activities, exact due dates, and an introduction to course objectives and contents at the beginning of the course form a solid basis for online studying. Approximately 85 percent of the students stated that these factors contribute very much or quite much to their online learning. In open responses, some students emphasized also the clarity of the study material and the clarity of learning activities, a working technical environment, well-prepared and recorded lessons, and availability of teachers.

According to students' opinions, there are two very significant factors, which contribute to learning a subject, namely personal feedback given by a teacher and submitted assignments during a course (Figure 2). Of respondents, 88 per cent think that personal feedback contribute their learning very much or quite much, and 85 percent that there are submitted assignments. It can be clearly seen that students do not appreciate other collective or other students' feedback.

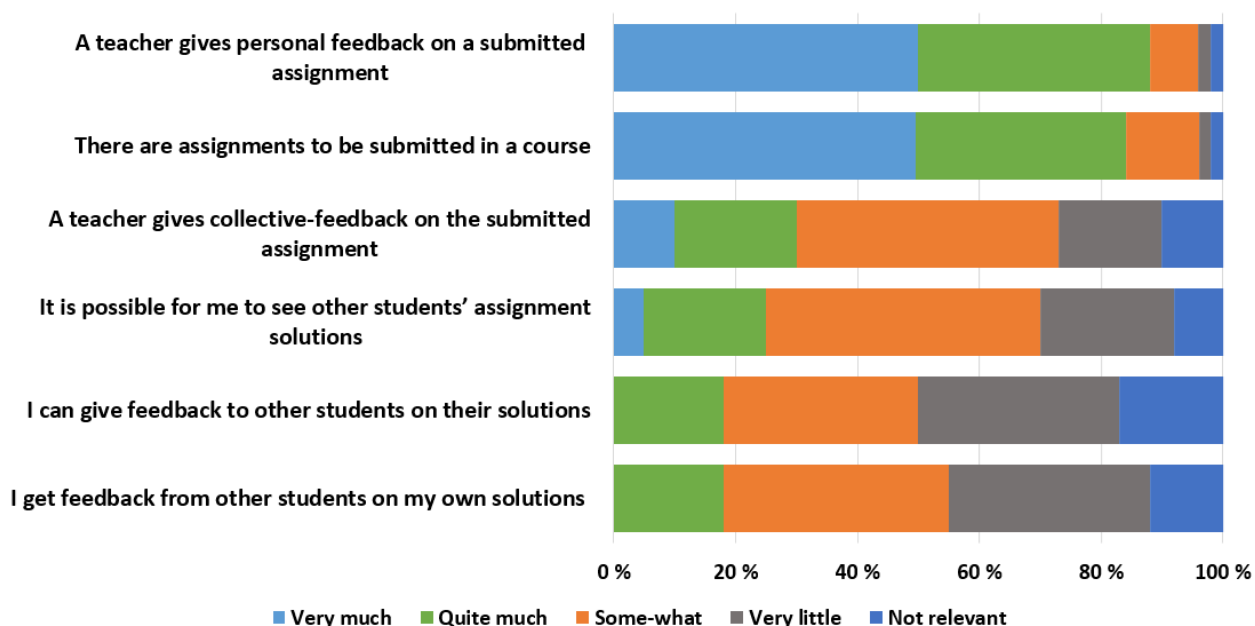


FIGURE 2. Factors contributing to learning a subject

Only 10 percent of the respondents think that collective feedback contributes to learning very much. It seems that collaboration between students, opportunities to see other students' solutions, getting feedback from other students, and an opportunity to give feedback to other students, contribute least to learning. No one regarded the significance of getting feedback from other students and giving feedback to other students as 'very much', and only 18 per cent as 'quite much'.

One student commented as follows:



"If there is no feedback, how could anybody know how the assignment was completed."

Several respondents brought out their own factors which contribute very much to learning such as links to useful materials, correct answers to exercises, online lectures, and own space. Several respondents emphasized the quality and the suitable number of different assignments.

In this survey, the contents and the role of online lectures was also studied (Figure 3). It was found out that lesson recordings are very important to students, because 92 percent of the respondents regarded lecture recordings as a very important issue. Additionally, separate recordings about the subjects of the lesson were regarded as very important by 40 percent of the respondents. But it seems that recordings cannot replace interaction with a teacher because online lectures, in general, were considered as very or quite important by 93 percent of the respondents.

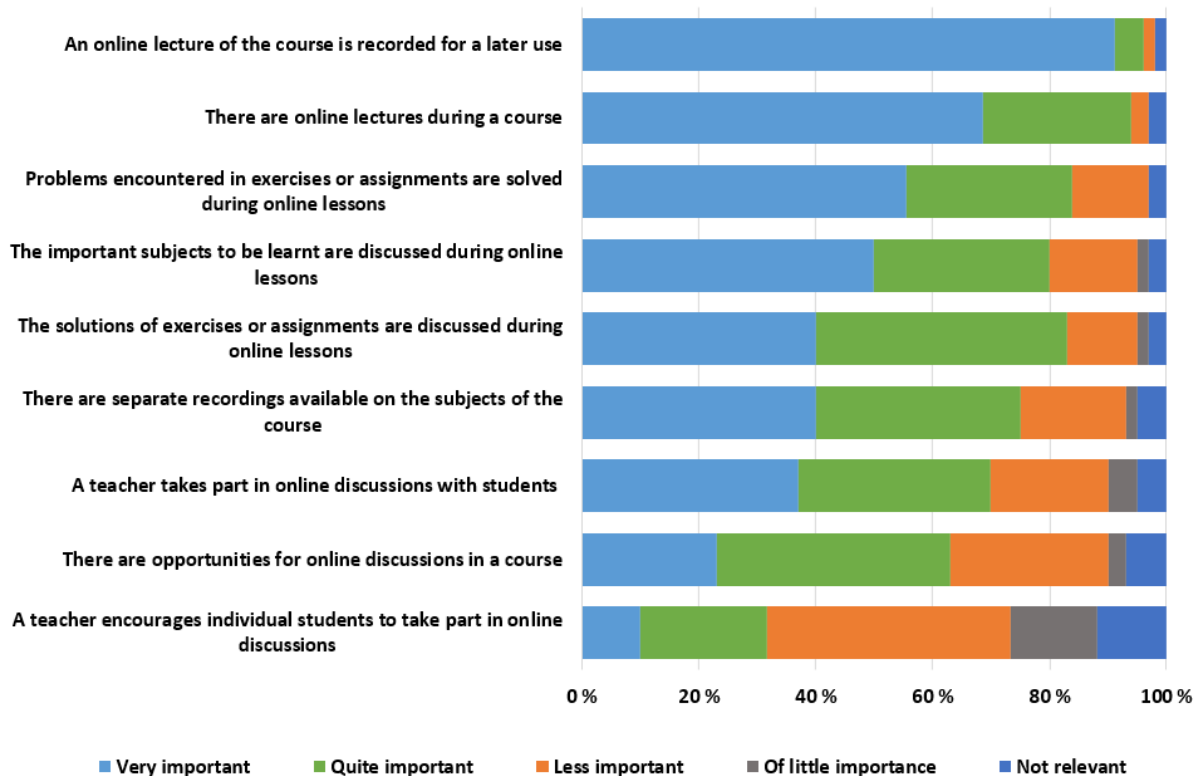


FIGURE 3. The contents and the role of online lectures in online learning

Recordings were also paid attention to open responses. A few students commented that pre-recorded online lessons contribute very little to learning. One student emphasized that pre-recorded lessons forbid online discussions and another student suggested that all the lessons should be held as live online lessons as scheduled.

Concerning the contents of the online lessons, 83 percent of the respondents think that it is very or quite important that problems encountered in the exercises and the assignments, and solutions of the assignments are discussed and solved together during online lessons. Discussions about the important subjects to be learnt are regarded as very or quite important by 80 percent of the respondents.

More than half of the students emphasized the role of interaction in online meetings. One student commented as follows:



"The best learning outcomes have been achieved by means of interaction with a teacher."

Other students emphasized a teacher's presence in online meetings:



"Social intercourse is very important."

"Dialogue and an opportunity for asking and discussing are very important in learning."

The open responses supported the important factors concerning learning, such as non-mandatory attendance, the quality of lessons and recordings, and quick responses to emails sent by students.

Results from the point of view of Social Presence

Interaction between a teacher and students seems to play a significant role while studying a new subject, but it seems that collaboration between students contributes weakly to the sense of belonging to a group. One student pointed out that online lessons should be held as scheduled and participation there deepens the

relationships between participating students. Another student highlighted the role of a tutoring teacher as a strengthening power. Tutoring lessons make students feel like belonging to a group.

According to the survey, 58 percent of the respondents think that meeting other students face-to-face affect very or quite much the bonds between students and belonging to a student group. On the other hand, less than a third (33 percent) consider becoming acquainted with other students via network as a bond-strengthening factor. Collaborative online studying and groupworking play a role, but not all the students are interested in becoming acquainted with other students. Some of them are unwilling to belong to any group. In fact, there was one student in the survey who several times emphasized in various open questions that the 'own space' is very important to him or her. Another student pointed out that group working causes only problems.

Most of the respondents, anyway, paid attention to the role of social media in relationships between students. Online discussions and social media channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp increase the sense of belonging to a group.



FIGURE 4. Social media tools (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Socialmedia-pm.png>)

Online discussions and the general opinion about different social media tools raised contrasting views. Half of the students agree and the other half disagree that it is important to use different social media tools during an online course. More than half of the students (55 percent) think that they should have their own group also in a social media.

It is very important to pay attention to that not all the students use social media. From that perspective, according to some respondents, it is good that there are also discussion forums and messaging systems in the online study environment, although it was highlighted that typical communication tools in an online study environment are quite stiff. One student pointed out that the study environment tools should cover the most important discussion forums concerning the subject-related discussions. Social media tools provide important and quick discussion and communication channels.

On one hand, it was highlighted that it is useful for online students to know and be able to use various social media tools in a versatile way, but, on the other hand, it may lead to inconsistency of communication if several communication channels are used. Some students regard email as a good collaboration tool.

Results from the point of view of Cognitive Presence

Almost all the respondents (98 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important that one can apply learning outcomes also outside the course. Additionally, 93 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly

agreed that the contents of the assignments affect the interest of the course and an interesting course make a learner familiarize also with the information sources outside the course.

Many respondents brought out some other important issues. Practical attitude to subjects, clarity of assignments, clear assessment criteria given beforehand, up-to-date material, written feedback, own space to think, closely related courses, and opportunities for discussions with a teacher. One student pointed out that a monotonous monologue does not contribute to learning.

Differences between groups

Student groups seem to be very different. The degree program or the subject being studied may explain some differences. On the basis of the field of studies, both business and IT students consider online lectures as important but it was more important to IT students. Additionally, it was more important, in general, for IT students to get feedback from other students. On the other hand, the business students regard a teacher's participation in online discussions more important, and business students were clearly more willing to meet other students face-to-face and to produce a common output in groups.

Summary

From the point of view of CoI model, a survey about blended learning was conducted. According to the survey, personal feedback, recordings of online lectures and good interaction are examples of things that are important to students. Other forms of feedback like, for example, the collective feedback, were not appreciated as much. It is important to remember that both the form and the extent of any feedback should be adapted to match the extent and the form of the course.

The process of peer reviewing may need some improvements in order to make two-way reviews both more sensible and more purposeful. Tutor teachers play an important role and they can be understood as an important collective resource for students. The feel of belonging to group and the good sense of community form the basis for successful and pleasant studying.

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<https://coi.athabascau.ca/coi-model/>

Picture References

1. ^FIGURE 1. Community of Inquiry, In Garrison, R., Cleveland-Innes, M. & Vaughan, N. 2014. CoI Model. Community of Inquiry. Accessed 1.12.2016. <https://coi.athabascau.ca/coi-model/>

Näin viittaat tähän julkaisuun

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Metatiedot

Nimeke: Best Practices of Blended Learning

Tekijä: Auer Liisa; Ijäs Tuula; Niva Anu; Ojala Pekka; Viinikka Sinikka

Aihe, asiasanat: Blended learning, Community of Inquiry, Distance education, etäopetus, kokemukset, korkeakoulupedagogiikka, monimuoto-opetus, opetusmenetelmät, sulautuva opetus, tietokoneavusteinen opetus, verkko-opetus

Tiivistelmä: Blended learning means the integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences. Because there is no unambiguous definition for the term, blended learning courses can fall anything between a fully face-to-face course, and a fully online course.

The Community of Inquiry model is a framework describing presence and place online. The CoI model encompasses three dimensions of presence for online learning spaces: teaching, social and cognitive presence, suggesting that effective online learning can only occur when it is supported by a learning community.

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